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Fear of the unknown

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by Bernard Gallagher

Abstract

While there is considerable public concern over stranger-perpetrated child sexual abuse (CSA) and abduction, much of the professional debate over this subject is characterised by quite polarised views and a dearth of reliable research-based knowledge. In order to start addressing this situation, a major questionnaire survey was carried out among almost 2,500 children aged 9-16 years in 26 primary and secondary schools in four types of area in North-West England. Children were asked about their experiences of attempted and completed stranger CSA and abduction “away from home”. Approximately 7% of children reported an attempted or completed incident. These were of four main types: indecent exposure, touching and abduction - each occurring on their own - or some combination of these acts. In terms of its broader messages, the research suggests that we should adopt a more balanced approach in our assessments of the seriousness of stranger CSA and abduction. The research also indicates that stranger CSA and abduction are complex phenomena, and prevailing stereotypes have only a limited value. The research highlights practice issues for child safety educators, the police, and therapists and counsellors, relating to prevention, disclosure, reporting and re-victimisation.

Introduction

Parents and carers are said to very fearful of the risk of their child being sexually abused or abducted by some unknown person (The Children’s Society, 2007). However, if parents/carers are looking for advice or information on how to keep their children safe, or just to allay their anxieties, then they are likely to be disappointed. For much of the discussion of ‘stranger danger’ is characterised by two diametrically opposed perspectives.

On the one side are the media which, with saturation coverage of high profile cases, foster the impression that the world is a dangerous place for children (Kitzinger, 2004). This message is ably reinforced by successive governments whose child protection policies concentrate, both explicitly and implicitly, on the risks posed by extrafamilial abusers - and strangers in particular (Parton, 2006). The most recent example is the proposal to allow members of the public to check whether specific individuals have a criminal conviction for child sex offences (Home Office, 2007).

On the other side of the debate are academics and representatives of children’s organisations who claim, with predictable regularity, that stranger child sexual abuse (CSA) and abduction are very rare and children are far more at risk from people they know. Their message is concisely, albeit bluntly, expressed in the title of the book by University of Kent sociologist, Frank Furedi, *Paranoid Parenting* (Furedi, 2001).

Although these two approaches are diametrically opposed, they employ and promote remarkably similar perceptions of stranger CSA and abduction. Research I have carried out, with colleagues Michael Bradford and Ken Pease, from the universities of Manchester and Loughborough, respectively, shows these views to be stereotypical, simplistic, fixated with extreme cases and

ultimately poorly informed (Gallagher, Bradford and Pease, forthcoming).

Methodology

The research - which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council - included a self-completion questionnaire survey among 2,420 children aged 9-16 years from 26 primary and secondary schools in a range of areas in North-West England. The questionnaire comprised five sections: demographic characteristics, lifestyle, victimisation and accidents “away from home”, fears and anxieties, and strategies for keeping safe. The victimisation section covered four types of incident: theft (attempted and completed), harassment, physical abuse, and CSA and abduction (attempted and completed). Children completed the questionnaire in place of one of their lessons. In the case of secondary school children, this was usually a personal, social and health education-type lesson. Teachers were not normally present whilst the questionnaires were being completed.

All children completed the same version of the questionnaire. It was worded, presented and structured in such a way that it would be comprehensible to children aged between 9 and 16 years. Draft versions of the questionnaire were piloted first with 10 children on a one-to-one basis, and then with 363 children in seven primary and secondary schools.

In view of the sensitivity of this topic, a whole series of steps were taken both to increase the likelihood of children answering truthfully and accurately, but also to make the survey acceptable to them, and their parents/carers and schools. In terms of the questionnaire, this included giving consideration to the wording, order and nature of the questions, and even the use of different coloured pages for different sections and sub-sections. In regards to questionnaire administration, this included giving children a briefing session prior to starting the questionnaire and a de-briefing session at the end (when they were also provided with ChildLine contact cards). In addition, both male and female researchers were present to provide help to children in completing the questionnaire if they requested it. Children were told that everything they wrote would be treated in confidence.

Although some children chose not to answer the questions on CSA and abduction, I and my colleagues are reasonably confident regarding the accuracy of the survey and the truthfulness of the children’s answers. This confidence stems in part from the response rate to the CSA and abduction questions (87%), the written accounts of incidents that victims were asked to provide, and exchanges between children and researchers during questionnaire administration. The following are examples of the accounts that victims provided:

13 year old girl

Me and my friends was at the bus stop when this guy came ... he stood still then unzipped his fly and took out his ‘thing’. Me and my friends just ran!!!

11 year old girl

I was 3 or 4 [years]. I can't remember how old I was but the man touched my private parts and I didn't like it. It hurt and I felt dirty and yuk. It was horrible.

12 year old girl

I was walking home with my mate because she had to pick her mum up from bingo and we was just outside my house and these 3 men in a car tried to pull us in and started calling [verbally abusing] us but we got half of the reg [car registration] number.

15 year old girl

I was going to the shops with a brother and a man said come to my house, then dragged me in upstairs and touched me where he shouldn't have.

The extent and nature of stranger CSA and abduction

The research presents a mixed picture of the seriousness of stranger danger. On the one hand, it is reassuring: only a small (though not inconsiderable) minority of children (7%) experience stranger CSA or abduction incidents, and almost one-half of all of these involve indecent exposure by the offender as opposed to any contact offence. Indeed, stranger CSA or abduction incidents are the least likely of a range of misfortunes to befall children outside the home, coming after accidents (80% of all children - a third of whom require medical attention), and harassment (32%), theft (24%) and physical abuse (11%) by strangers. On the other hand, the research gives cause for concern: some incidents involve serious sexual assaults or attempts to abduct children by getting them into cars. Three-quarters of victims are very or quite frightened by their experiences. So while we should not get the risk of stranger CSA or abduction out of perspective, neither should we underestimate it.

Broader messages

The research found that stranger CSA and abduction are complex phenomena. They consist of four main types of incident: indecent exposure, touching or abduction - each occurring in isolation - or some combination of these acts. This categorisation is, itself, based upon a large number and wide array of offence scenarios. Rates of victimisation were significantly higher among girls (10%), older children (13-16 years, 9%) and those living in urban areas (inner city plus social housing estates, 9%), compared to boys (4%), younger children (9-12 years, 6%) and those living in non-urban areas (suburbs plus rural, 5%).

The higher rate of victimisation among girls is almost certainly due to more offenders being sexually attracted to girls rather than boys. Increased victimisation among older children is probably down to their lifestyle i.e. they spend more time outside the home and are consequently

more at risk. It is not clear as to why children in urban areas experience more victimisation. It may again be because of lifestyle but is possibly explained by other factors as well. In particular, there may be more child sex offenders and abductors living in urban areas or alternatively these types of offender could be targeting urban areas.

An especially surprising finding of the research is that 68% of incidents take place when the victim is with other children. This result may simply be a reflection of the fact that when children are out they are often with their peers. However, a significantly higher proportion of the indecent exposure incidents compared to touching incidents (84% and 46% respectively) take place when the victim is with other children. This suggests that perpetrators may target either groups of, or single, children dependent upon the type of offence they wish to commit.

The stereotypical view of stranger CSA and abduction is that it is perpetrated by lone, adult males, against teenage girls who are on their own and in quiet locations, such as parks and streets at night time. While some incidents match these stereotypes many do not. Incidents are committed by females (12%), other young people or children (26%), groups of offenders (24%), against boys (29%), children in primary school (29%) and in indoors locations (17%). Prevailing stereotypes may have some validity but overall they do not appear to be that useful.

Critical issues

As well as casting an important light on the extent and nature of stranger CSA and abduction, the research highlights a number of critical issues which, though initially troubling, also point to ways in which the prevention and response to these threats can be improved.

Stranger CSA and abduction consist of considerably more attempted (i.e. failed) incidents than completed ones. There were, for example, 41 attempts to abduct a child but only four completed incidents. This underlines the difficulty of gauging the risk of stranger CSA and abduction, and shows that it should not be based upon 'successful' incidents only. On a more positive note, this finding suggests that children are able to thwart efforts by strangers to sexually abuse or abduct them. This is something that could be built upon in child protection programmes, such that children's ability to ward off attacks is strengthened.

Only 50% of victims tell their parents/carers about what has happened to them. Although they may tell other people, such as friends and siblings, children obviously need to be encouraged to disclose their experiences to parent/carers, or other trusted adults, if they are to obtain the support they may require after stranger CSA or abduction incidents.

It is equally worrying that only one third (33%) of incidents are reported to the police. This means not only that many offenders cannot be brought to justice but also that other children are left at risk of being abused. Clearly, the police need to do more to make children, parents/carers and others aware that it is vitally important to report incidents of stranger CSA and abduction.

Another striking finding of the research is that more than one quarter (29%) of all victims of *stranger* CSA and abduction have experienced some type of CSA and/or abduction incident

previously. This appears to indicate that existing victims of CSA or abduction are at heightened risk of re-victimisation, at least from strangers. It is not clear as to why this is. Research in the United States has found that non-family abductions are significantly more prevalent among families experiencing psycho-social problems (Finkelhor, Hotaling and Asdigian, 1995). So, it may be that children from vulnerable backgrounds are at risk of serial victimisation and in a range of settings. There would, then, seem to be a major onus upon helping agencies to ensure existing victims of CSA or abduction receive sufficient support whereby they are better protected from future harm.

Improving knowledge

It is hoped that this research can make some contribution towards combating stranger CSA and abduction. However, it is only one study. Indeed, it is believed to be the only dedicated stranger CSA and abduction victimisation survey in the UK. There have been far more studies of child criminal victimisation, including 'stranger danger', in the United States (see, for example, Finkelhor, Hammer and Sedlak, 2002; Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner and Hamby, 2005) but few elsewhere in the world.

Given the levels of public concern and controversy that surround stranger CSA and abduction, but above all the terrible cases that do occur - such as those of Madeleine McCann, Sarah Payne and James Bulger - it is remarkable that there is so little research on this subject. Much of the responsibility for this rests with my fellow academics, many of whom dismiss stranger danger as a *social construct* - or, in layperson's terms, a figment of society's imagination.

This research suggests that we should not be frightened of strangers but should be mindful of the risk that they can sometimes pose to children. The 'unknown' we should perhaps fear, is that represented by our profound lack of knowledge of stranger CSA and abduction - a lack of knowledge that has undoubtedly undermined efforts to prevent and improve the response to these dangers.

Lessons for Practitioners

- Practitioners carrying out child protection programmes should not only continue but should expand upon this work with children to further reduce the risk of attempted incidents of stranger CSA and abduction becoming completed ones.
- The above practitioners should also encourage children, when they have been victimised, to disclose these incidents to parents/carers or other trusted adults, and encourage the reporting of these incidents to the police.
- The police also need to make clearer to the public the importance of reporting incidents of stranger CSA and abduction.
- Therapists and counsellors working with children should consider giving further support to

existing victims of CSA and abduction to reduce the risks of their becoming victims of *stranger* CSA and abduction.

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